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AUTHOR Beck, James P.
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ABSTRACT

College freshmen often misread poetry because they cannot read precisely, because the culture and the teachers stereotype poetry as cryptic frill, or because they underread the poem's complexity of response. These problems can be surmounted by using a facets approach to discover the meaning of a poem. Facets illuminate the fact that various poems are variously both subject-matter and something else. Moving from subject-depiction to thematic concept to intrinsic artistry, they include (1) a reflection of the poem's subject matter, (2) dramatic showing of the subject matter, (3) narrative poetry, (4) theme or truth about life that the subject matter approaches, (5) preaching or teaching, (6) social criticism, (7) psychological character portrait, (8) tone, (9) light verse, (10) analogy, (11) aesthetic form, and (12) pure play. To use this approach the teacher must be absolutely convinced that a poem can mean more than one thing and that the student's experiencing of the work is worth more than mechanical reporting of what the teacher feels is the "obviously correct" facet. (HOD)

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James P. Beck
Department of English
University of Wisconsin
Whitewater, Wisconsin 53190

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TEACHING FRESHMEN POETRY: IS THE "ONE RIGHT ANSWER" CORRECT?

Is poetry the most difficult item to teach in all of literature--in all of General Studies? College freshmen seriously misread all poetry which they do read. Actually, they both overread and underread, shooting beyond but also falling short of the mark of exactness. Readers should first grasp a poem's "subject-matter," its "plot" of explicit, literal objects and people and events. But students will springboard right past this toward "hidden meanings," on the wings of random associations.

Even worse do they underread. They plod through the literal plot, never raising eyes nor ears to divine the poetic qualities between and beyond the lines, such as suggestively implied themes, complex tones, aesthetic pattern, dynamic showing not just static telling, and the like --such "facets" as a poem does refract. The poem sings far above their heads. Students thus miss the poem as a complex response to complex experience which--perhaps uniquely among all forms of communication--can provoke the reader to organize his own insights too.

To deal with all this doubly-wayward misreadings, in my own English 102 classes I developed, and tested and refined, a "facets" method to help students read poetry both more exactly and more expansively. For a dialectic is sorely needed here; poetry is imagism, the subject itself experienced lovingly, and it also is symbolism, the subject as vehicle

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for--something(s) else. My method works--significantly, only somewhat. And its application (and limitations) have raised a whole train of foundation-questions about methods, and prior aims and goals, in literature--and in education generally.

(1) Just how much do, and can, freshmen college students (and by extension high school seniors perhaps) enjoy poetry--or not? How much of their ignorance of, and distaste for, poetry, can we alter--and not, and why? (I'm afraid that honest and deep-delving investigation here produces a not-totally-sunny report.) (2) Relatedly, how can we best expand their reading skills beyond plodding literalism, but caution them short of springboarding toward "hidden symbols"? And how can we balance their responses between seeking "the one right answer" and feeling that "any answer is right--it's poetry, after all!"?

(3) As for course goals, should we perhaps aim less for "perfectly" correct reading and passive content-mastery for them now, at age seventeen, and try instead to lay groundwork for more active, responsive reading later, in middle life? (Note how most of the adult students in class, seasoned in the life-awarenesses which poetry can embody, will smilingly warm to much verse!) (4) And as for course method and content, then, should we perhaps, through using more brief, easy, modern, poems, drill less upon the technical "grammar" of poetry (the terms and concepts) and emphasize more poetry's accessibility and variety (hence my dozen "facets," or ways of seeing, a poem)?

Consider, for example, William Blake's "The Sick Rose." Freshmen regularly overread, but also underread and in a sense "non-read," the

piece at first.

"Rose, thou art sick! / The invisible worm / that flies in the night / in the howling storm / Has found out thy bed / of crimson joy / and his dark secret love / does thy life destroy."

Now the poem does have subject-matter. Clearly, nocturnal worm destroys threatened rose. It also has a "theme" or truth-about-life, shown via analogy. And yes there is, and can be, "one right answer" here. The core meaning is that evil (or death) can attack and destroy worthy goodness (or life) in a subversive, clandestine fashion.

But many of my students underread it all, never exceed the subject-matter. For them, the poem only reports images and truths about--horticulture, literally. Other students, however, do overread. They zoom past the mutually-perceivable core meaning to grasp such derivative "meanings" as adultery breaking up a marriage; Communism destroying America; and so forth.

Too, other students non-read the poem as such, as poem. Theme or truth carried by subject-matter is only one of the dozen "facets" a poem can mean or be. Other "sides" include dramatized showing of the subject-matter; use of symbol and analogy (rose=good, worm=evil); also toneful nuance of mood; even the paradox of love as destroyer to mull over.

I suggest that students' double-barrelled mis-shooting is due to three main factors, only some of which we can alter, and that the whole tangly problem of aiding youthful human beings to experience the most powerfully complex form of language which exists, raises basic and brambly questions, not only about the methods, and goals, of introductory college-

level poetry teaching, but also about "correct answers" and indeed instruction-versus-education generally.

Why, then, do they misread verse?

(1) Because they can't read precisely, can't sharpshoot between the two poles of "didn't you want the one right answer?" and on the other hand "isn't any answer we see, really right?" (Both of these extremes are bunkum. Indeed there is no "one right answer"--but there are core versus associative responses, plus those dozen facets. And as for "anything goes," a poem is properly multifold, but it is not a Rorschach inkblot test. Happily, this "wildfire" reading can be corrected.)

(2) Because the culture and the schoolrooms stereotype poetry as cryptic frill, a poem seems a tricky minefield which one must "tear apart" and "dig for the meaning" and get the "symbol" or the "lesson." But of course theme, moral, and analogy are only three of the dozen facets a poem can be. Indeed, although poetry is a smorgasbord or food fair offering many simple savorings of subject-matter, tastes of tones, and the like, yet students often religiously restrict themselves to a diet of cracking the nut of symbol, or swallowing the classroom-prescribed pill of "meaning"--which is of course good for them. Happily also this stereotyped aversion can be corrected, somewhat.

(3) Because they are 18-year-old Americans, conventional and inexperienced, students massively underread--non-read--the poem's complexity of response. We can conceptualize poetry as offering a spectrum as wide as the world's short-wave broadcasts, of subject-matters (traditional to exotic, even "unrespectable") in a variety of tones (decorous,

but also wacky, explosive, and the like) with a variety of world-views (from the simply conventional to the profoundly subversive). Alas, freshmen come equipped to tune in only upon the narrow "AM band" of sentimental stock responses, popularly-received conventional truths. Only life-experience, and not poetry courses, can add new crystals to their sets, I would argue; and so we can't reduce this third reason for misreading, and disliking, poetry. (However, "English 102" may be able to lay the groundwork now for future enhanced appreciation of poetry in later years. All my adult students smiled and savored their way through the unit. . . .)

If we teachers doubt that students numbly truncate the essence of poems--or if we believe that we can do much to sharpen their blunt response--we should, as an "indicator," assign them to write their own responses to a good selection of presumably "accessible" but substantial poems after they've studied poetry, but before any of the selected poems are discussed in class. (Note: having students write on poems after the textbook or teacher or discussion have explicated them, gives them practice in nothing but taking dictation--nothing.) Gratifyingly, the poetry unit will save them from springboarding to those overreadings, and will let them savor, not symbol-hunt, the simpler poems per se. But no instruction can prevent them from grievously mis-reading and underreading the more substantial poems.

I selected 40 poems from the modern anthology A Geography of Poets, edited by Edward Field--a garland of informal, even colloquial, but also substantial, verse. The students' worksheets, explaining the poems via

applying any facet of their choice or no facet, were extremely illuminating x-rays of their "calcified" responses. Some of Field's poems are vigorously "unrespectable," wackily breaking through norms toward insight, impishly transgressing boundaries of propriety toward an elan vital, as in the wryly irreverent "Twelve Photographs of Yellowstone," not your usual tourist album at all. ("This is the bear that ate up baby," "This is the geyser that scalded all those nuns.") These poems the students often misread as just "gross," or surely "wierd" or puzzlingly disrespectful, or of course "social criticism of our National Park Service." Other of these poems were thoughtfully realistic in world-view, assessing problems, perplexities, ambivalences as well as joys, of parent-child relations, of growing up, and the like. In the midst of such growth-experiences themselves, the students mostly missed the more pithy meaning of the experiences that the poets--and, presumably, the students themselves--had had. Students also tend dourly to misread any poem that is not totally maplesyruped over with Hallmark Card type optimism, as being "too pessimistic." Some poems conveyed their subject-matter amid overtones of cosmic connectedness and joy in vital consciousness, as in Gary Snyder's far-reading "Bath." These intensifications of experience some students still reduced to the subject-matter level. "This poem is a narrative about a family taking a bath"--all the overtones wiped away cleanly thus.

We can't blame them for this third type of nonreading. As suggested, poetry cannot create enhanced responses to life; it can only consolidate and confirm the insights about life which experience alone can produce. But perhaps we teachers might trade "perfect readings now" for "possible

appreciation later," surrendering "the right answer" reported in rote feedback and seeking tuning-in to various ways or facets a poem can mean and be.

Actually, I wonder whether we let ourselves fully realize how very antiseptic and anaesthetic the students' experience with poetry really is? Many instructors do feel it's "educational" to establish "the right meaning" to a poem, via lecture or discussion, by stating or by implying, and then have students write on that poem, via essay or exam. All that usually happens is that the student dutifully delivers, to the loading-dock of the Grading Machine, the bushels of the cash crop of the "right meaning," as ordered. The student wears rubber gloves all the while. Some membrane, anyhow, intermediates between him and any direct response to the poem. He or she is naturally fearful of getting bitten by the complex poem as such; or getting stung by giving the wrong answer to the teacher, or getting burned by giving a dumbly-"wrong" answer in class amid peers. I wonder: maybe far better than making them mechanically harvest the received crop, is getting them to grow one tendril of their own direct experienced response to the poem in the gardens of their own perception. This is good seedtime for later fruitions, too. Their response need not be sloppy overreading, but it may well have to be incomplete and "incorrect" in critical terms, in order to begin to be their own response too.

(A candid note here on the possibilities, but also the limits, of increasing bona-fide student appreciation of poetry. No break-through seems possible; even after my unit which frankly if subliminally sought

to create actual enjoyment of poetry, many students noted on the feedback-questionnaire their feeling that enough was too much, that "There ought to be a separate English 102 section for those interested in reading poetry" (!). On the other hand, a pleasant and unexpected surprise: many students spontaneously asked to be allowed to retain the material containing the 107 short poems, lively and accessible and contemporary, to which we had applied the facets, in order to show these poems to their friends and share them with them. So, though a great deal is just not possible, something is.)

Here then is how my own "facets" approach operates to help students read poetry more exactly, but also more validly. The unit's keystone slogan is that "subject-matter plus 'facet(s)' equals the poem." I read a selected crop of poems with the students. The chosen poems are mostly (not all!) modern, they are easy at first and then (moderately) difficult, and especially they are varied, ranging from simple savoring of subject-matter through subtler symbolism, and then other types or facets too. And the instructor <u>honestly</u> encourages honest student response.

First, we grasp the subject-matter, the literal "plot." (True, a nicely associative poem can tug at the reader's sleeve during his first perusals as merchants in a bazaar invite the stroller to ramifications which may indeed be enrichments not irrelevancies! Still, we should seek the "backbone" first.)

So far, this is standard. Every teacher probably says, "paraphrase the poem first." But then we view the poem through the purviews of the facets, which are "tried on" like lenses or sensors, not to <u>define</u> meaning,

but to facilitate it. Here the "facets" approach opposes the strong current of most education, which seems to funnel and close down to exact meaning. We, however, seek to broadcast, to open out to diverse meanings, many potentially "correct" at once. We would negotiate the stubborn fact that, as communication, poetry is immensely tangled indeed. The message itself is multiform; although not inchoate, poetry is yet properly diverse. The readers or receivers are diverse in their varying perceptual sharpness and in their varied life-experiences they bring. How to guide the reader toward a more careful reading, but stop short of prescribing the one correct meaning? We seek here to mitigate the double-bind situation of the poetry class, in which the student is first told "you're missing the point, you should look deeper," and then soon enough "you're overreaching, read more controlledly." Now expand, now contract--it's vexatious.

Here then are the facets, illuminating the fact that various poems are so variously both subject-matter, and something else. A given poem indeed conceals a theme in a symbol, but then the next poem simply mirrors and savors its own subject-matter--no mining for morals desired!

Moving from subject-depiction to thematic concept to intrinsic artistry, then, we have facet #1, the poem merely "mirroring or reflecting/reporting" its subject-matter, neutrally at first, or perhaps savoring it appreciatively. Facet #2 is "dramatic showing" of the subject-matter: not telling, but re-creating the poet's (and therefore the reader's) direct experiencing of it, moving thus one step beyond sheer mimesis. Facet #3 is "narrative" poetry, still on the subject-matter level; the

poem has a story to tell. Facet #4 is indeed "theme or truth" about life, which the subject-matter approaches--ascends toward--becomes: either patently, or implicitly, and either from the very first lines, or more gradually as the poem goes. Facet #5 is a variant, "preaching or teaching" a moral issue through the subject-matter. Facet #6 is "social criticism" of whatever specific target in the subject-matter, maybe with satire, maybe not. Facet #7 is "psychological character-portrait," a study of the person in the poem--or, of the poet and/or the reader! Facet #8 is "tone, mood, atmosphere": the subject-matter overlaid with the author's voice and temperament: a central facet, a difficult one, a rewarding one. #9 is "light verse" for humor per se; also tone-ful too of course. #10 is "analogy," the subject-matter conveying theme either via explicit simile, or implicit, dramatized metaphor and symbol. Facet #11 is "aesthetic form": patterned theme plus repetition with variation of ideas, words, sounds per se. Facet #12 I include as catchall category of "pure play." Here the poet juggles the subject-matter as balls-in-the-air for his sheer <u>elan vital</u>, as he disports on the carpet of nature.

Thus do the facets replace the monolithic bullseye target of "the one right answer," with a shifting, sliding spectrum of at least twelve dimensions of identity, all to facilitate, not to replace, the student's own response.

Two notes here as to textbook apparatus and also teacher attitude. First, this approach suggests deferring, and perhaps omitting, critical poetic terminology in the freshman poetry unit. Once per course, I "tear apart"--explicate--a moderately difficult poem in re analogy, diction,

connotation, puns, imagery, and other figures of speech. This is vital; many students do want to see--once!--the inner clockworks of a poem such as, for instance, David Wagoner's "Every Good Boy Does Fine" or "Closing Time," or W. S. Merwin's "The Drunk in the Furnace"--these on relevant themes too. However, too much putting this ponderous cart before Pegasus can only reinforce the student stereotype that poetry must be translated, or archaeologized, or dissected, in order to be enjoyed.

But the major trick here is psychological, how we apply the method. My party line is that there is no party-line response--except what the individual student finds upon careful reading. No single facet is "the correct one"--unless or until the individual student decides on one on his own. Yes, also, a given poem can mean and be more than one facet! The "right" facet for grading purposes is--the one the student can most cogently employ in writing about the poem. Indeed, I soon make the use of the facets semi-optional: "no facet" is possible. The whole approach is to clarify not to smudge, direct response to poetry.

Note, however, that the teacher must be absolutely, totally convinced that a poem can mean more than one thing, and--especially--that the student's experiencing of the work is worth more than mechanical reporting what the teacher feels is the "obviously correct" (or indeed "pet") facet. Let us indeed correct inferior responses based on basically sloppy misreadings of subject-matter; but let us only comment more gently upon underreadings based upon youth and conventionality, sharing our insights after the students have written on the poems. If we unthinkingly overreach to groom their present response, we may well blunt future responses.

Given these two cautions about termirology and teaching-style, the method works. Gratifying it is to experience how the class does concur-and-diverge on a poem such as "Houses," describing urban renewal as like the replacement of old decaying teeth with shiny new plastic dentures.

> The dentists dig deep to extract
> old houses from the city's jaw--
> they remove the rotting brick roots,
> mess around with the disease-puss of the sewers,
> their pneumatic drills explore the aching caverns
> before the wounds are allowed to heal--
> and then they build a gleaming
> white skyline of false teeth
> not rooted in the jawbone of tradition
> but whole rows juggled
> on a precarious dental plate.

Most student hands shoot up when asked if the poem is indeed Facet #10, analogy (thus pleasing the teacher, who thinks so too; but I retain a poker face). But others agree yes it is also #6 social criticism of impersonal new architecture. And it's also #8 a tone of simple musing plus calm disgust, and it is also #4 the theme or truth presented.

A good ploy is to group several short poems on the same subject-matter, for this juxtaposing will show how some of them are indeed "about" just that subject-matter, and others are, indeed, "about" something else indeed. Here are three poems ostensibly about crickets:

"Crickets": "Crickets / crickess / cricksss / cricssss / crisssss / crssssss / csssssss / ssssssss / sssssssts / sssssets / sssskets / ssscksts / ssickets / srickets / crickets"

"Splinter": "The voice of the last cricket / across the first frost / is one kind of good-bye. / It is so thin a splinter of singing."

"Last Night There Was a Cricket in our Closet": "I got out of bed

twice, took down boxes and / suitcases in a search and destroy mission / but couldn't find him. // Then, we were crickets. / You rubbing your legs against mine / and vice versa // trying to find me / trying to find you / that cricket in the other's closet."

Pity the student dutifully digging for the hidden meanings here, overarcheologizing these flowerbeds! In terms of facets, the first poem is surely <u>just</u> imagism, simple reporting, or actually dramatized showing, of an actual summer evening, short of any theme. Then, "Splinter" reports subject-matter, but in order to suggest a truth about the seasons, and does so artfully--via metaphor, and spare sparse tone too. The third poem analogizes the subject-matter for incident savored, and psychological truth conveyed by light tone--but again, proffers no hidden morals. Thus does poetry variously depict, also employ, its subject-matter.

Before observing how the facets actually illuminate other short poems, a further note on the thorny issue of "correctness." As poetry teacher, I feel I must manage the psycho-political economy of the classroom, specifically must balance between the soft-core totalitarianism of seeking "the one right" answer, versus the aesthetic anarchy of allowing as how "any answer can be okay." Useful here is the scheme of one central "core" meaning plus secondary meanings, as in "The Sick Rose." (So also, in the verse "Humpty Dumpty," the clearly-correct core meaning would be that "some things broken cannot be remedied by any means," and secondary explorations would involve pride going before a fall, the dangers of over-extending oneself, and the like.)

But the issue of correctness is even more prickly. Students both

do, and do not, believe that there are "many 'correct' answers" to a poem. At the start of the unit, many students claim that there is more than one correct answer simply to try to preserve lenient grading in the class. A few anarchists, honestly mistaken, say and believe that "any answer you want to give is correct." However, as the unit continues, many students soon get quite prescriptive. They desire certainty; stubbornly they ask which is "the right" facet. This desire for "correctness" of course has many causes. Sociologically, the twelve-year tradition of the classroom milieu emphasizes "the right answer," which students thus seek to give to save their grade, to gain teacher approval, and to avoid peer ridicule if they give the "wrong" or "dumb" answer--the Lone Ranger syndrome which operates, if we are honest enough to admit it, all the way through our own graduate seminars! Psychologically too, 18-year-olds especially desire closure of the Gestalt, are intolerant of ambiguity. Clearly, if the facets approach is going really to work, to bloom, the teacher's attitude must be totally housecleaned, cellar to garret, from even covert wisps and subtle traces of monistic prescriptivism.

Indeed, what about teachers' attitudes about "correctness" in poetry? We do hew to a sort of monolithic prescriptivism, probably for a mixed bag of reasons. As noted, many teachers do believe that the poem does carry one inherent "correct" meaning for all readers and times. (Space prohibits debate on this point, but see I. A. Richards' study Practical Criticism, detailing how supposedly-able Cambridge undergraduates interpreted standard poems in wide variance. See also everyday reading experience.) Second, we surely may feel a duty to teach the subject completely,

help the student to Get It Right, shuttle over to them the answer which "all reasonable readers can surely agree upon" (sic). Then of course we test the students, to ascertain whether they've "gotten" it, whether our vaccination of them with this required serum of culture has "taken" against the plague of barbarism, they "exposed" to validity thus. Further, and more darkly, we may well teach prescriptively and test rigorously because we desire to control those otherwise-lazy pupils--we'll make 'em produce --there'll be no laying back and coasting through--even if we do it via making them jump through hoops and mangle what they can get out of the subject later on. Finally, who knows, but that we wish to blunt our subliminal awareness that students have learned, will learn, can learn, virtually nothing about poetry as such--at least about poetry as we know and love it. Their gross smudging of poeticity is too dismaying to face.

For they cannot apply our critical methods to explicate classic, standard poems on their own; they botch things monstrously, truncate essences. They hear only that AM band, as noted. This is true in every classroom. It is true in mine, despite my vaunted "facets" approach, which only ameliorates, does not resolve. It is true in your classroom too, as you will see if you assign an exercise like mine from the Field anthology as noted above, the students to read and explain poems on their own, now without the crutches of prior class discussions on them.

Extreme example is no proof, but I well recall the results of pairing up two poems, W. D. Snodgrass' "A Flat One" with the anonymous "I Am Fine, Thank You." In the first, the poet depicts in stunningly candid fashion his subject-matter, a slowly-dying patient in the terminal ward where

Snodgrass was an orderly. The poet sensitively assesses his own complex response to the grim situation; he is concerned, regretful, but also weary of it all, also vexed by the dilemma of this situation which he felt so directly and presents so squarely.

The second poem is a godawful piece of popular doggerel about aging, brightly slick. The poet is just fine, thanks, except he aches all over, and so forth, and at night puts his teeth in a cup, his eyes on the shelf, and in the morning reads the obituaries to see whether he's still alive! And so it clunks on, via rhythm and rhyme too. The results? Too many students saw "no difference" between the two vastly different versions--or, also predictably, thought the second was "okay" and the first was either incomprehensible or, of course, "too pessimistic." Is poetic experience thus wasted on the youth?

Finally, in terms of criticism, is the "facets" model too simplistic? Isn't a poem an organically-unified system, which the facets scheme, artificially divorcing subject-matter and the rest of the poem, risks murdering to dissect? Actually, four of the facets correspond nicely to traditional western conceptions of poetry, as classified by M. H. Abrams in The Mirror and the Lamp. He spoke of poetry which is mimetic (#1, reporting), didactic (#5, preach-teach), expressive (#8, tone), and objective (#11, aesthetic form). More to the point, the relationship of a poem's subject-matter to the total poem varies widely, not only in different poems, but in the perceptions and preferences of different readers and also schools of criticism.

John Ciardi said that "a poem is never about what it seems to be

about." This caution fine-tunes our ears, but can also make us mar poems which "simply" mirror or savor their subject-matter. Formalist New Criticism preferred to shunt poetry's mimetic function aside, keep it below the salt--or, more fairly stated perhaps, preferred to focus on the poem as such, not the poem as factual information. This formalist doctrine, valid, can actually save poetry from prosaic or scientistic readers, who would merely milk or mine poetry for the extract of its "message," scattering shards of artistry about negligent. Robert Langbaum noted this seriously flawed popular image of poetry as merely "a kind of inexact prose decorated with metaphor and souped-up with emotion." In fact, of course, as Harry Levin noted, a poem can mirror society and also be its own heterocosmic self. Perhaps the facets approach also can help preserve this "both-and," not simply either-or, approach to the poem, blending extrinsic and intrinsic criticism thus.

And in terms of pedagogy, perhaps models which would sound too simplistic to the seminar in advanced criticism, are actually functionally productive, and hence pragmatically "true," in the freshman classroom, less "sloppy" than they are flexible indeed. Liberal undergraduate education, so this argument goes, should not be merely a "baby" version of technical, graduate-level instruction.

Here then is how the facets approach can operate as applied to 27 of the 107 poems on my introductory handout for the unit. We see the refreshing alternation between "mere" presentation of subject--depiction or scene--and then assessment of that subject by the poem--employment of a clue. Thus do the facets chromatically tincture the daylight-white

picture of the subject-matter itself.

In #1, the poem merely mirrors or reflects its subject-matter, photographically reports it (although of course most poems begin to do more with it at once):

"The Runner": "On a flat road runs the well-train'd runner, / He is lean and sinewy with muscular legs, / He is thinly clothed, he leans forward as he runs, / With lightly closed fists and arms partially rais'd."

Few poems are as prosaically mimetic as this. And yet, W. C. Williams wrote "Poem": "As the cat / climbed over / the top of // the jamcloset / first the right / forefoot // carefully / then the hind / stepped down // into the pit of / the empty / flowerpot." We're accustomed to more "meaning" even amid the imagery, as in Williams' more famous "The Red Wheelbarrow," in which "so much depends on" the item "glazed with rain water beside the white chickens." But beware students' scraping below the surface of the following simple vignette, for example, trying to restore some grand moral. "Poem": " . . . and just around the corner, there, lying in the street, dead, with baby-seat agog, on its side, a supermarket basket, killed by the wind. . . ." Richard Brautigan surely intended no more than a snapshot of the subject-matter, albeit in a tone pleased with its perception. Indeed, the tone of authorial temperament quickly informs poems which are "mainly merely or only" depictions/recreations of their subject-matter. Thus did Emerson write grandly on snow ("Announced by all the trumpets of the sky") even as Emily Dickinson wrote delicately ("It sifts from leaden sieves").

In this first facet also belong poems with subject-matter simply "saved and savored for its own sake," beyond clinical reportage but short of attached concept. Also at times the subject-matter is especially "related to the rest of reality" via a leap of sheer imagination. This is seen in Sandburg's "Omaha," where the "plot"--evening on a crack express train--soon carries the twin themes of the vastness of the cosmos, plus the unawareness of most of us to it: "I am riding on a limited express, one of the crack trains of the nation. / Hurtling across the prairie into blue haze and dark air go fifteen all-steel coaches holding a thousand people. / (All the coaches shall be scrap and rust and all the men and women laughing in the diners and sleepers shall pass to ashes.) / I ask a man in the smoker where he is going and he answers: 'Omaha.'"

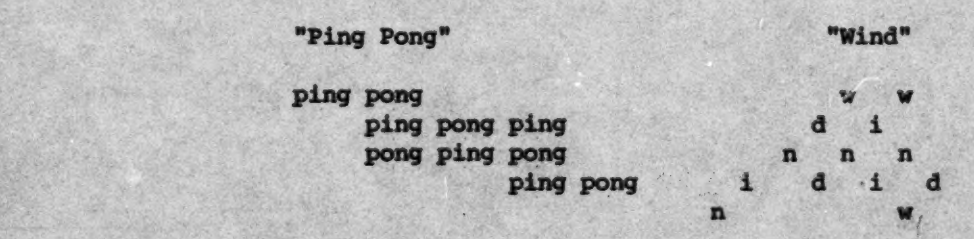
So also Louis Simpson's "In The Suburbs" compresses volumes of anthropological ethnography, and light-years of provincially lived existences, into six lines which start perhaps at the kitchen sink: "There's no way out. / You were born to waste your life. / You were born to this middleclass life // As others before you / Were born to walk in procession / To the temple, singing."

(2) In "dramatic showing," the poem does not report the subject matter, but recreates it, for the reader not to hear about, but to experience personally. These dynamic poems show, instead of tell. And of course some will show a substantial theme or idea, but others will show "only" (!) the experience of the subject; let us neither overread nor underread. Here, the photograph of Facet #1 becomes play or performance, infused with the stamp of tone or temperament too. Marianne Moore deli-

cately traces her subjects: a carriage from Sweden, and so forth. Dylan Thomas rampantly renders his aliveness in his native village. James Dickey enhances and recreates his military, sporting, and amorous experiences--no sobersided reportage there. Less report than re-creation, W. C. Williams' "The Kermiss" sashays via rhythm-and-rhyme to render the peasant dance right on the page.

Sometimes specific analogies--similes and metaphors--operate to move poem from photograph to play, as in Sandburg's minor piece "The Cheer Leader": "The cheer leader struts his stuff, / wig-wags the swaying grand stand, / throws himself into alphabetical shapes, / trying to orchestrate his crowd. . . ." Sometimes analogies plus imagery--sensually-concrete renditions of the subject--are used, as in the densely-gnarled portrait, a burnished verbal woodcut in fact, of John Updike's "Winter Ocean," oapque to most freshmen until gently explicated: "Many-maned scud-thumper, tub / of male whales, maker of worn wood, shrub- / ruster, sky-mocker, rave! / portly pusher of waves, wind-slave."

In this facet can be placed concrete poetry, poems for the eye. These vignettes do not report but render, employing aesthetic form too, another facet. We have seen-and-heard "Crickets," and here are images of two other mundane subjects:



(3) "Narrative story" is a prime facet of dramatic monologs (Browning)

and other narratives (Frost) where chronciling of the subject-matter seems primary.

(4) "Theme or truth about life" is of course the facet toward which most students first gravitate, mistaking poetry as dramatized philosophy. We in fact "explore" how poems move from their subject-matter toward concept-content in widely varying ways, and speeds, sometimes from the very start, sometimes only near the end. Tennyson's "Ulysses" moves from re-telling the legend to the philosophy, even the "moral," of life-living through action which the subject embodies. Browning's "Dover Beach" proceeds from the actual beach scene to the philosophy of love amid relativistic uncertainty which that scene is made to carry, or point toward. Robert Frost's conclusions, or at least his considerations (he called a poem "a momentary stay against confusion") grow variously out of the described subject-matter. They emerge directly in "Dust of Snow," almost as explicitly in "The Road Not Taken," more suggestively in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (but how critics have trampled and crisscrossed the surface of that report-plus-observation about time and duty), and more analogically in "Fire and Ice" and especially in "Nothing Gold Can Stay," whose last line, also the title, concluding just what it says, is arrived at after a buildup of a nicely-expanding series of ever more general subjects noted: the spring morning, dawn, and Eden.

(5) In the case of "preaching and teaching" a moral lesson, we must affirm that didacticism in art is much less featured today than it has been; that however all art takes an implicitly moral stance in a sense; but that students still regularly over-read morals into too many poems.

They routinely rubberstamp their response "the author tells us that we should." But they should avoid this stock response unless moralizing is explicit in the poem, as it occasionally is, as for instance when a sports poem "about" the subject-matter of track events pivots (via analogy) to theme, indeed to admonition: "Live / as I have taught you to run, Boy, / It's a short dash. . . ."

Facet #6, social criticism, again is obvious--except when it isn't. Anticipating the next facet, that of tone, these poems show great range, from impassioned denouncing, to understated, knife-sharp disgust. Consider the quiet double-whammy of "Quatrain": "The golf links lie so near the mill / That almost every day / The laboring children can look out / And see the men at play." Or, the gently-rebuking tone in "For a Lady I Know": "She even thinks that up in heaven / Her class lies late and snores, / While poor black cherubs rise at seven, / To do celestial chores." Compare the more ironic and sardonic "How to Succeed (For Niggers Only)": "Don't fight, Boy! / That's not the American way! // Laugh, sing, dance, / Grin, hope, and Pray." Finally, the whipcrack of wit appears in "Impromptu on Charles II": "God bless our good and gracious King, / Whose promise none relies on; / Who never said a foolish thing, / Nor ever did a wise one."

#7, psychological character-portrait, is a variant of #4 perhaps. Here the subject is the human, whether the generally human, a specific person observed, or for that matter the poet's own psyche: and whether clinical case-study, confessional, or a blend. We recall the gallery of types in Edgard Lee Masters' Spoon River Anthology, also in Robert Browning's

dramatic monologues in Men and Women, and perhaps Hardy's lesser-known series "Satires of Circumstances." Stephen Crane's poetry contains a dozen along these lines. Here is one: "I was in the darkness; / I could not see my words / Nor the wishes of my heart. / Then suddenly there was a great light-- // 'Let me into the darkness again'." Note that there is a sub-class of poems under this facet which explore and consider certain specific historical or contemporary figures--be they malady-ridden Theodore Roosevelt, a child-molester in Chicago, or the fanatic, obsessive-compulsive sculptor of certain western hills--not for any great truth about life, but for how these figures look, and seem and mean, to the poet.

#7, tone, remains keystone of the facets. It is also the most difficult facet to explore in the classroom. Hence, by the way, oral interpretation of most poems becomes a pleasant (if under -used) requirement of any poetry unit. Read them aloud--trying on various tones of pitch, stress, juncture, and paralanguage until they "fit"--to swirl back into life what the words freeze-dried upon the page.

Tone is of course atmosphere, the subject-matter overlaid with mood. It also includes the author's characteristic voice, "nature seen through a temperament." Thus depictions of the "same" subject differ; a locomotive rendered by Emily Dickinson is daintily delicate, by Walt Whitman elaborately lusty, by Stephen Spender semi-formal. But tone quintessentially is both plural or mixed (even contradictory) and often understated too. Indeed, the full palette or register of tones is wider than the monochrome note of middle-C reportage, wan and dun.

For, tone in poetry includes of course the properly-poetic "decorum,"

lofty and grand. It also includes humor, from puffball whimsey through comedy to satire both sunnily corrective and acidly condemning--and of course the topsy-turvy stance of irony. It also includes "unrespectable" zany irreverence, apparent grossness, and surely the glad shouts and sheer wackiness of pure sportiveness. It includes stentorian outrage, toplofty sad resignation, knife-sharp disgust. And it includes gentle musing, calm regarding of "what is," glad gratitude or life-reverence. Many of these rivers can mix within one poem in subtly converging currents. Further, of course, the poet may simultaneously be speaking both in a role or a mask, and at some "role distance" from it, qualifying the surface with his self behind it. Tone is myriad indeed.

Note, for example, how in this group of different-faceted poems on the same subject-matter, the tones and hence the whole stance, vary:

"Resume": "Razors pain you; / Rivers are damp; / Acids stain you / And drugs cause cramp. / Guns aren't lawful; / Nooses give; / Gas smells awful; / You might as well live."

"Summer Hotels": "These places abound in the old, / Who do nothing but quibble and scold; / Discussing their tumors / And stock-market rumors, / They are tangibly covered with mold."

And the more sternly-stoic "On His Seventy-fifth Birthday": "I strove with none; for none was worth my strife. / Nature I loved, and next to Nature, Art; / I warmed both hands before the fire of life, / It sinks, and I am ready to depart."

Or the more complex blend of resigned regret plus calm reverence in "Old Mary": "My last defence / Is the present tense. // It little hurts me

now to know / I shall not go // Cathedral-hunting in Spain / Nor cherrying in Michigan or Maine."

And of course e. e. cummings' noteworthy "Buffalo Bill's Defunct," ending with the clever--and at the same time incisively concerned--"and what i want to know is / how do you like your blueeyed boy / Mister Death"

Then what of a poem whose tones are plural, simultaneous, perhaps opposing, but all enrichingly valid? Sometimes these are quite easy to argue out, as in the case of Brautigan's insubstantial little "Life Song": "Isn't life beautiful / Isn't life gay / Isn't life the perfect thing / To pass the time away." But here is a poem with enrichingly plural tones, simultaneous, possibly opposing, surely subtle too, for a complex response to complex experience. Eberhart's "For a Lamb" seems a classic on this point. Students are baffled; I suggest to them that its tone is at once lofty, decorous, concerned, and also disqualifying, even flippantly so:

> I saw on the slant hill a putrid lamb,
> Propped with daisies. The sleep looked deep,
> The face nudged the green pillow
> But the guts were out for crows to eat.
>
> Where's the lamb? whose tender plaint
> Said all for the mute breezes.
> Say he's in the wind somewhere,
> Say, there's a lamb in the daisies.

Facet #8 is <u>light verse</u>; and here we can pause to hear from Ogden Nash, John Updike, and many others.

Facet #9 is "<u>analogy</u>," comprising simile, metaphor, symbol. This includes both a poem bearing several one-line-long comparisons within it, and also a poem which itself is one long analogy, its subject-matter vehicle for the tenor of the theme.

Often analogy is used to convey no theme, simply render the subject-matter. Nicely imagistic to savor per se is Sandburg's "Fog": "The fog comes / on little cat feet. / It sits looking / over harbor and city / on silent haunches / and then moves on." No message in that mood-piece. So also Pound's "In a Station of the Metro": "The apparition of these faces in the crowd: / Petals on a wet, black bough." The one-line comparisons may be numerous, as in this photograph "On Watching the Construction of a Skyscraper": "Nothing sings from these orange trees, / Rindless steel as smooth as sapling skin, / Except a crane's brief sneeze / And all the muffled, clanking din / Of rivets nosing in like bees." The subject-matter of the construction of high-rise buildings is conveyed by analogy--actually, analogies--to the activity in an orchard. Note one explicit simile, and many implicit metaphors. (Compare this with "Houses," above, criticizing urban renewal.)

In the second type of analogy, the poem is indeed "more" than its subject-matter, is theme or truth or even moral, or social criticism or character-study for that matter, but whatever it is, it is transported by the vehicle of the subject-matter. Behold, "hidden meanings" at last! In "The Sick Rose," worm-attacking-rose clearly stood for evil/death attacking good/life. Walt Whitman's live-oak growing alone, and noiseless patient spider, are <u>explicitly</u> compared to human aloneness and connectedness. <u>Implicit</u>, however, is May Swenson's use of "The Contraption" of a roller-coaster ride at the county fair to embody--to show dramatically --one's entire life-career as it soars from heady pristine freshness to diminish into a decelerating shuttle through gloominess.

So also Rilke's "The Swan," deigning to embark upon supporting waters, implicitly is the human soul stepping from the landside of life. Quite similarly, William Meredith's "The Open Sea" soon moves from the maritime to become the universal vast gulf and final ending place of more than shipwrecked sailors. Cafavy's voyage to "Ithaca" is about every-person's voyage to wherever one goes in life. And David Wagoner's "Staying Alive" in woodlands is about far more than survival on a camping trip which it so clearly approximates in textbook-fashion. So also Philip Booth's "First Lesson" is about teaching his daughter more than about swimming strokes. Delmore Schwartz' "The Heavy Bear" is bout an animal quite familiar indeed. W. D. Snodgrass' "The Examination" is about no brain surgery at all, but about any and all indoctrination, socialization, social control. John Donne's "A Burnt Ship" is about dilemmas in general. Ted Hughes' mild-mannered "Dove-Breeder" takes to raising hawks, and psychologically that means something. Analogous poetry is thus enough to confuse, then challenge, the student. When does a poem "mean" only its subject-matter, when something "else" or "more," and when both? Practice can help, somewhat--the ability to spot analogy is difficult to teach and learn.

Facet #11 is "<u>aesthetic form</u>," meaning that a large portion of the poem's reason-for-being is the interior play of theme and variation with repetition, akin to much patterned tension-and-resolution in painting and music, the more non-discursive arts. Examples here include the fixed forms of verse, and also poems such as Dannie Abse's "Odd" and David Wagoner's "Every Good Boy Does Fine" (both of which also happen

to include thematic comment on self-and-society and also psychological character-scrutiny).

At the end of this long roster, we leave Facet #12, "sheer spirit," to explain its own saltating and sportive self when delightfully encountered.

By now the student can see that many poems can be easy, and that others are indeed difficult, but that obscurity in poetry has many causes, not all bad. True, some writers can be snobbish or elitist. And some readers are inexperienced or careless. But also, themes can be intrinsically subtle. Also, in "dramatic showing," a deliberately soft-focused surface gradually reveals import to the participating reader without being glaringly over-clear. Allusions, references to events and knowledge outside the poem, also enrich. Thus is poetry not a hiding but a distillation, it's something to savor meaning out of, not "tear apart" or split open.

Obscurity and suggestiveness thus become beneficial. Poetry is compression (style is "attainment and restrainment"). Poetry is "gists and piths." Less is more. Once we know that a Native American wrote the short poem "They Came," we can simply appreciate its artistically-tight dramatization of a whole historical period and social criticism thereof. "They came / I greeted / They needed / I helped / They asked / I told / They pushed / I moved / They chased / I ran / They killed / I died / They live / I wait"

No need to facet-monger, either, with Auden's third portion of "Three Songs." In only eleven lines, two whole divergent historical life-styles are embodied by the simple subject-matter: "Bending forward / With stern faces, / Pilgrims puff / Up the steep bank / In huge hats. // Shouting

I run / In the other direction, / Cheerful, unchaste, / With open shirt / And tinkling guitar."

But what shall we do with Tennyson's "Eagle"? Permit him to stay aloft, shot with nothing more than the lens of "reportage"? Or harness the bird to bring us a meaning or message? (One springboarding student, alas, felt that the final line, "And like a thunderbolt he falls," confirmed that the subject-matter indeed symbolized a businessman in difficult economic times. I soon corrected that misreading.)

And what of such "found poetry" as this memorandum allegedly retrieved from the floor of a commuter railway car in New York City? "Don't Forget": "tulip bulbs, aspirin, Monster cards, Gin, New Ian Fleming, Fur cape for doll, small cocktail shrimp, ulcer medicine" Is it explicit reportage? Wry-toned social criticism? Implied showing? Covert narrative of events? And so forth.

As time, ability, and interest permit, the unit then examines longer, earlier, and more demanding poems which embody universal themes and tones in nicely-concrete images of the subject-matter. Thus, Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour" is simultaneously precisely-delineated ethnography of a New England island, and also a complex of psychological and artistic response, quite deeply explicable without scraping bottom. So with Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish," surely a story of catching a venerable veteran of the deep--and the poet herself caught on the issue raised by the circumstance. But the short poems, the "short takes," remain eminently useful to introduce students to poetry's variety via the facets.

Thus do students learn how poetry variously savors, and surpasses,

its subject-matter in a dozen modes. I have much student feedback on the unit. This response confirms that the "facets" approach--when used with a skilfully light hand as discussed above, as facilitator not prescriber--works well to both channel, and expand, responses for almost all students. Perhaps then we do need something like this approach anyhow; more students "like" poetry at the end of the facet-informed unit than ever before, and they're happily vocal (on anonymous questionnaires) about how the approach--and the teacher's attitude--has helped --as much as any approach can--to free them from the tyranny of worrying about "which is the right answer," also the dour habit of commencing to "dig deep" when encountering verse.

About 10% of the students regularly disapprove of the method, claiming that the method put ideas in their head wrongly, or actually blurred their own readings. Refreshing it was to hear others in class, however, spontaneously correct their peers who were over-applying the method mechanically, and voluntarily argue the complexity of poetry over and above any facets or other method.

Read many poems, short poems, different types of poems, mainly (but not exclusively!) modern poems, substantial poems but also easy poems--and let the "facets" unfold the flower but not pin down the wriggling butterfly. Sanitise teacher-attitude clean from prescription, toward "appreciation"--and yet retaining a light-touch monitoring, surveillance. Do explicate (yes, "tear apart") one or more difficult poems via language-use (diction, allusion, imagery, simile and metaphor, tone-quality, and puns)--perhaps the Wagoner and Merwin examples as noted above. But do

this as demonstration of how complex poems are constructed and operate, not with expectation that students can explicate such on their own.

So the class enjoys the "facets" method for its main use, as facilitator or "tickler" to assist, not shoulder aside, their own interpretations. Students generally recommend that future poetry units include the approach, at least at the start, to launch things well. And indeed the facets model is designated to be self-destructing in a sense, to fall away like the guide-towers of a rocket as the missile itself proceeds, thus freed from earthbound literalism but on a more exact course, not shooting wide and wild of the mark after all. . . .